

## **Until teachers learn correctly, kids won't read**

Recent state test results highlight the dismal reality of poor teacher preparation in early reading instruction. Over one-fourth of Arizona's third-graders are behind in their reading. Even more alarming is that 44 percent of the state's non-English speaking third-graders are in the 25th percentile group or below, the bottom of the achievement scale.

Although this is an improvement, the districts and state know that it is not nearly good enough. Some districts are scurrying to focus on early intervention (rightly so); some are pursuing professional development programs for their teachers.

But here is the rub. The current crop of teachers (and just about all the new ones coming out of Arizona's colleges of education) has not been taught how to teach reading. . Oh, they have been taught how to read to their students, how to create literature-rich environments and other whole-language approaches, but not much on how to teach phonics or other research-proven reading and language strategies. Remember, California embraced whole language only to have student performance drop dramatically for years, until that state recently eliminated it in favor of more research-based practices.

The research on reading instruction is clear. Louisa Moats, project director at the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Interventions Project, in her report, "Whole Language Lives On: The Illusion of 'Balanced Reading Instruction,'" states that young children need instruction in systematic, synthetic phonics in which they are taught sound-symbol correspondences singly, directly and explicitly.

Sure, children should be exposed to literature (fiction and non-fiction) and attention to language development is essential for promoting comprehension. However, Moats notes that teaching reading cannot be a "combination plate" approach where one takes a little from whole language and a little from phonics.

In fact, combining the two types of reading instruction will not help children become readers because the two approaches are incompatible. Whole language approaches are against systematic teaching of language-structure: no grammar, no spelling, no rules.

But somehow within the walls of Arizona colleges of education this approach lives on. My review of the course descriptions that teachers are required to complete for elementary certification indicates a lack of respect for research- proven approaches to teaching reading.

In fact, one of the colleges of education in Arizona, known as the home of whole language, teaches that disproven approach as the primary way to teach reading to young children.

Teachers in Arizona are hardworking and devoted, but without the proper training and tools, they are fighting an uphill battle. Since approximately 50 percent of the teachers in Arizona schools are educated by Arizona colleges, state school districts will have to provide professional development in what many of the Arizona colleges of education purposely neglect.

And don't let the schools of education tell you that they have a "balanced approach;" unfortunately, that has become code for whole language.

So, until schools of education are held accountable for what they teach, Arizona will suffer the results: Teachers who haven't been taught to teach children how to read and children who "lag" behind.

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This article originally appeared in the Arizona Republic, August 2, 2001 edition. It is reprinted here with permission from the author.

There are a number of Arizona charter schools that are using proven phonics based methods for teaching reading. Call 602-542-8264 for more information.